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# Eating Away: A Study of Women's Relationship with Food in Literature

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# **EATING AWAY**

A Study of Women's Relationship with Food in  
Literature

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In both fiction and reality, women often develop dangerous relationships with food. Women have starved themselves to emaciation and gorged themselves to obesity. These relationships often destroy the women's lives, but sometimes they provide the only means women possess for wielding control over their own bodies. In her study of fasting women in medieval times, Caroline Bynum suggests that food, and the manipulation of it, were vehicles through which "women controlled their social and religious circumstances quite effectively" (220). In a traditionally patriarchal society, women have been granted very little autonomy so they have taken advantage of any elements they could control. Food was one such element because:

[b]y means of food, women controlled themselves and their world. Bodily functions, sensations, fertility, and sexuality; husbands, mothers, fathers, and children; . . . the boundaries of one's own self" were all controlled by abstaining from and bestowing food. (Bynum 193-94)

Strikingly, Bynum links women's autonomy and control over their lives with the development of the *self*. While Bynum's study focused on medieval women, her claims are still applicable to women today. The interesting differences in attitudes between the two periods are that medieval *men* also participated in excessive fasting for religious purposes and, also, at that time, fasting was not considered a disorder. The women and men who fasted received great honor and respect for their strength of body and purpose and death from fasting was meritorious. It is only in our twentieth century society

that fasting has come to be seen as a disorder responsible for many premature deaths of women.

Women struggle against a male dominated structure to grasp control and shape their own identities. In her analysis of the “feminine mystique,” Betty Friedan states “It is my thesis that the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of *identity* - a stunting or evasion of growth” (Chernin 17). Friedan is correct--many women cannot define the boundaries of the self and, further, cannot find an identity within the larger social structure to claim for themselves. These three issues--self, autonomy, and identity--are interwoven as causes behind the development of eating disorders.

Several contemporary female authors have identified and described the interrelationships of these causes in novels about women with destructive relationships with food. Barbara Pym's Quartet in Autumn shows a woman reaching retirement age who starves herself to death. Fay Weldon's The Fat Woman's Joke tells the story of Esther, a married woman in her mid-forties whose marriage falters and sends her into a state of self-absorption during which she gorges herself night and day. The Edible Woman, by Margaret Atwood, is about a young woman facing marriage whose disorder begins when every day she finds more foods that her body refuses to take in. Strikingly, these three authors all wrote their novels before eating disorders were the cultural phenomenon they are today. At the time these women created their characters' dilemmas, no one really discussed anorexia nervosa or bulimia. Thus, rather than expounding on a societal trend, Pym, Weldon, and

Atwood identify a well-hidden problem inherent in women today. And while the manifestations of the women's disorders are very different, the similarities are striking.

None of the women in these novels fits the stereotype of women with eating disorders exactly, but instead, they indicate or represent the deeper *causes* of eating disorders. In her book The Hungry Self, Kim Chernin suggests that the "onset of eating disorders coincides with an underlying developmental crisis, regardless of a woman's age" (23). All three of these novels indicate major events, or times of conflict, where the women's destructive disorders begin. After their individual conflicts, all three of the protagonists fear a lack of control over the direction of their lives. Finally, all three women find their senses of self and their identities in their social structure threatened in some way. These factors are the most significant in bringing on the eating disorders from which these women suffer.

In Barbara Pym's novel, Quartet in Autumn, the three main issues that surround Marcia's eating disorder are her reaction to the loss of control over the events in her life, a need for attention, and confusion about the boundaries of her self. All three of these issues are interrelated because of women's sense of identity and autonomy, both of which are threatened for Marcia. In The Art of Starvation, Sheila MacLeod says that "to refuse, literally, to 'take in' from the environment allows many anorexics the opportunity to take over their own bodies for the first time" (181). Marcia grasps that control over food as she loses control in other areas.

Marcia and Letty are being forced to retire. Having reached a certain age, their jobs will be phased out and a small afternoon gathering will be provided in their honor. This creates an identity crisis for each of them. Letty faces her crisis by adjusting her lifestyle, bravely moving on through holidays and maintaining relationships with her co-workers, Norman and Edwin. Marcia, on the other hand, withdraws into her own world and firmly shuts others out. When Janice, a home visit social worker, comes to check on her, Marcia will only "reluctantly open the door to admit her" (Pym 120). Marcia retreats from reality and the outer world, and, as she does so, her appearance changes radically. In addition to her rapid weight loss, her clothes and hair are unkempt, her behavior to others becomes rude and abrasive, and her only concerns are inner order and autonomy in her personal life. Little disorders, like a mismatched milk bottle in her collection, throw off the precarious balance that Marcia is trying to maintain. Her cabinets are lined with cans of tinned food, small and orderly containers that lie in a structure controlled only by her. These small details of control, the matching milk bottle collection, the tinned food, even the decision not to have her long grass cut (Pym 65) are Marcia's feeble attempts to compensate for the lack of control over her job and even her own body.

As we learn about her impending retirement, we also discover that Marcia's control over her own body was violated just a short time ago when she had to have a mastectomy. All the characters in the story know about the operation: "She was not a whole woman; some vital part of her had been taken away, though whether womb

or breast was not generally known" (Pym 9-10), but none of them discuss it beyond Marcia's ambiguous references to her recent surgery. It is essential to notice that Marcia's cancer, that eats away at her insides, results in the loss of her breast--a woman's means of feeding or nurturing others. Marcia seems to have accepted the cancer and the inevitable surgery-- without any active decision making. After being raised to believe that "she would never let the surgeon's knife touch her body, a woman's body being such a private thing" (Pym 18), she actually complies with the surgeon's orders without any resistance. The surgeon, who is appropriately named Mr Strong,<sup>1</sup> coolly and deftly makes Marcia's choices, removes her breast, and orders a re-check. She is left feeling completely dependent on him and less connected with others, who cannot understand the significance of her loss. Slowly, Marcia creates a more intimate relationship with the doctor in her mind than she will ever have in reality and simultaneously alienates herself more and more from her group of co-workers and eventually from reality.

Her need for attention is interesting because Marcia disregards attention from anyone not associated with cancer directly. In fact, she treats others who intrude on her privacy with complete disdain and seeks attention only from those connected with the disease or the surgeries performed to get rid of it. In the beginning of the story, Marcia passes a young girl collecting money for cancer and says, "A *very* good cause and one very dear to *me*. You see, I too

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<sup>1</sup> The typical convention of a period used after Mr is omitted by Pym throughout the novel and, thus, will be used in this way here.

have had...I, too, have had *something removed*" (Pym 18). The uncomfortable young girl does not truly care about Marcia's plight and the sympathy could be more effectively obtained from Marcia's friends, but she will not turn to them because she does not believe in their ability to relate to or understand her loss. Marcia struggles with feelings of emptiness that the mastectomy has left her with. Her breast was a great part of her sense of self as a woman. In her book titled Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass, Jenijoy LaBelle asserts that the sense of self is "the one thing that humans always try to cling to" (19). Now that Marcia's physical image has changed, her self is directly threatened. She is sure that others can "sense her imperfection, her incompleteness" (Pym 103), and since she cannot deal with that inadequacy, she stops thinking of herself as having a self. Without an intimate relationship between her inner self and her physical shell, she cannot pay attention to herself, and she develops an obsession with obtaining that attention from Mr Strong.

Marcia's obsession with Mr Strong is evident throughout the book. Her drawers are lined with new nightgowns for a hospital stay and her refusal to eat finally brings her there--back under Mr Strong's care and control. Her reluctance to eat, however, is problematic even in terms of the attention the doctor gives her. She senses his disapproval when he asks about her dropping weight but the crowd of doctors around her dying body is the only reassurance she has of her own importance (Pym 173). Once she has finally starved herself enough to be brought back to the hospital, back to



the man who first created the emptiness within her, it is too late for his kind attention and care. Marcia has starved herself to death.

Along the way, Marcia cringes from any perceived interference from others. The very presence of other people makes her uncomfortable and "conscious of her breastlessness" (Pym 103). Marcia insists on living her life without any intrusions from the outside. This issue, the boundaries between inside and outside, provides one of the most striking indications of an eating disorder. In Boundaries of the Self, Roberta Rubenstein says that:

[w]omen have more permeable ego boundaries; [there is] a tendency in women toward defining the self in relation to others which leads to boundary confusion and a sense of separateness from the world. (6)

Like many other women, Marcia struggles to define her self--a self that was never very well defined to begin with--throughout all the radical changes in her life. First, the physical and then the lifestyle changes alter the tenuous connections that Marcia had established in her life. After her retirement:

She had no sense of time passing and was surprised when darkness came. Her most conscious thought was irritation at the idea that the do-gooding social worker might call, so she did not put the light on but sat in darkness. . . . She had no memory of having experienced the first day of her retirement. (Pym 116)

With her connections to others broken, she feels separate from the world and is never able to regain her grasp on reality.

Pym uses several different images to demonstrate Marcia's attempt to determine boundaries or thresholds for herself and, then, to forbid anyone from crossing them. As mentioned before, when the social worker comes to visit, Marcia *reluctantly* opens the door. Two of Marcia's co-workers come close to visiting her, but do not cross the threshold of her door. When Edwin examines the church door (that, significantly, is locked), he realizes that he is standing on Marcia's street and "he walked on quickly" (Pym 32). Later, he pities Marcia and thinks back to that night:

Perhaps he should have dropped in that evening he  
found himself on the other side of the common,  
passing the road where she lived. He wondered if she  
ever went to the church with the locked door. (Pym 46)

Even though he worries about her, he still doesn't cross the line. With Marcia, there is always the sense of being on "the other side of the common."

Norman, while coming closer to visiting Marcia, is more acutely aware of the boundary he is unable to cross. He wanders down her street, certain that he will recognize her house because it "will stand out as being different from the smartly tarted-up suburban semi-detached Victorian villas with their pastel-coloured front doors, carriage lamps, paved patios and car-ports" (Pym 145). He finds her dilapidated house, sees Marcia clutching milk bottles, and his instinct is to run away (Pym 146). Norman can sense the precarious balance of elements, like the milk bottles in her arms, that Marcia is trying to maintain. He fears his intrusion in her world could tip the balance. Marcia looks at him but gives no sign of recognition, thus drawing

her boundary and forbidding Norman's passage. In this manner, Marcia drives away all outsiders from her inner world.

Strikingly, in the same way that others cannot or do not enter Marcia's world, she is painfully aware of her inability to interact in others' worlds. After one visit to the doctor, she rides a bus out to Mr Strong's house, hoping to catch a glimpse of his life. She thinks, "Perhaps there was a side entrance to the house which would give her a view of the back garden" (Pym 154). She stares longingly at the house and the guests arriving for the dinner party, and she even realizes the similarity between her voyeurism and Norman's:

She found herself thinking about Norman and the way she had seen him standing on the pavement opposite her house when she was putting milk bottles into her shed. She had resented his being there, resented what seemed his prying curiosity into her affairs. Could it be that her standing outside Mr Strong's house would be seen in the same way? (Pym 155-56)

These boundaries, that keep the characters out of each others' lives and prevent connection, are also drawn in relation to food consumption.

Marcia's food, purchased in regular, sterile tins, is an element of the outside world. If she eats, the food becomes an inside part of her self. Its nourishment would keep her alive and give her strength, but it would also keep her inner self connected to the outer world--a place where Marcia feels she does not belong. Thus, there is an unseen boundary between food and her body and food cannot be permitted to cross into the inner realm. Marcia does not seem

conscious of this barrier. Hilde Bruch, an expert on eating disorders, says that anorexics are:

confused in their concepts about the body and its functions and deficient in their sense of identity, autonomy, and control. In many ways, they feel and behave as if they had no independent rights, that neither their body nor their actions are self directed or even their own. (Suleiman 180)

Marcia has relinquished control over her body to the doctor, Mr Strong, and control over her lifestyle is lost with the loss of her job. With a diminished sense of identity, Marcia plunges into a void where she cannot find her self. Since she has no inner self, there is very little need to nourish the physical shell. Marcia, who "had always been thin and since being in the hospital had become even thinner" (Pym 29), willingly or unwillingly starves herself to death. She justifies her small appetite by repeating the claim, "I've never been a big eater" (Pym 132), over and over again. Her physical self dwindles as she forgets to eat, sometimes even beginning to prepare meals only to leave them untouched.

Ironically, she has fond memories of the days in the hospital when others had to provide food for her: "'Cup of tea, Miss Ivory? Sugar, dear?' It gave Marcia a warm feeling to remember those days and that nice woman - Nancy, they called her - coming round with the tea" (Pym 141). During her hospital stay, people nurtured her, thus filling one of her primary needs. Nancy, the woman in the hospital, is Marcia's provider, her food source; she symbolizes Marcia's lost breast. Now, with no one to care for her and no

capability to care for her own diminished self, Marcia loses all control and we are left with a pitiful image of her dying alone in the hospital. When her beloved Mr Strong comments on her extreme weight loss, she "wanted to tell him that she had never been a big eater but she found it impossible to get out the words" (Pym 175). The futility suggested by this account of Marcia's life is tragic. There is no humor and no hope offered at the conclusion of this novel.

In contrast, the second novel, The Fat Woman's Joke, by Fay Weldon, is both funny and promising. The main character, Esther, is middle aged and a much stronger character than Marcia. Her relationship with food is far different from Marcia's--it would best be described as gluttony--but even so, it stems from some of the same inner conflicts as Marcia's refusal to eat. For example, Esther also feels her sense of self and her control over her own life being threatened. However, Esther deals with these threats in very different ways and instead of denying her body its physical needs, she heads toward the other extreme and overeats.

Esther's crisis begins when she and her husband decide to go on a diet. Esther's "disorder" is different from the other two that I studied because her overeating has a very conscious, rational dimension. Esther realizes, through her attempt at weight loss, that her marriage was based largely on the rituals of food preparation and consumption. "Alan and I were accustomed to eating a great deal, of course," she says. "So you can imagine how vulnerable a diet made us" (Weldon 17). Most of the time spent in communication or connection within their marriage was based on food. Esther spends her days planning, shopping, and cooking, feeling cheated if they

were asked out to dinner (Weldon 17). Food preparation becomes her occupation and a part of her self. The shared meals are the last part of intimacy remaining between them. Even Susan, Alan's secretary, notices the closeness food represents for them and grumbles jealously:

It drove me mad. She had such a soft, possessive voice. I wondered why he took so little notice of me. And why was there was no one *I* could ring up, in the perfect security of knowing they would be home for dinner, come what may, and obliged to eat what I provided? (Weldon 29)

Eating is part of the glue that holds the two together, so their diet threatens their relationship and, in some ways, even distorts each one's sense of identity. They take on their diet as a battle against themselves. Alan says, "Esther, we are going on a diet, you and I. We are going to fight back middle age. Hand in hand, with a stiff upper lip and an aching midriff, we are going to push back the enemy" (Weldon 25). This declaration suggests another, related enemy that the two perceive: middle age. They both connect the swelling of their bodies with growing older and, thus, their diet commences with hopes of shedding both pounds and years. At the beginning of the diet, Esther and Alan are amusingly cranky. She continues to call his office to ask questions about how to prepare the evening's omelet (Weldon 33). Esther tries to maintain a semblance of their pre-dieting life, but to no avail. By the ninth night of their diet, they lay in bed discussing the food they long for: "Steak and kidney pudding with mushrooms and oysters and the gravy oozing

out" (Weldon 69). However, while this suggests humorous images of a couple dreaming of pork chops, Esther also relates a poignantly sad aspect of their diet:

We decided to do it. He quite willfully set about depriving me. I quite willfully set about depriving him. We conspired together to break our marriage, in fact. I was less whole-hearted about it than him. I would have retracted if I could. I made peace-offerings. I tried to cook him omelets in butter. He chose to see it as an act of aggression. He was determined not to be married to me anymore. (Weldon 84)

While there can be some questions as to the veracity of Esther's interpretation, she blames the diet for the collapse of their relationship. And as the marriage dissolves, Alan's affair begins.

All the characters recognize the connection between Alan's lack of food and his sudden need for sex. His secretary, Susan, says, "The first time he actually laid hands on me was the day he started his diet" (Weldon 30). Esther also recognizes a change in his voice that day and has a "sudden vision of his temporary secretary sitting there exhibiting her legs to him under the desk" (Weldon 34). Esther's vision is not far off. Alan and his secretary begin clandestine meetings in the park, his office, and her apartment. He tells her, "There is a gap between stocking top and knicker which excites me beyond belief. I want to eat it" (Weldon 63). In this way, Alan makes Susan seem edible. He tries to devour her, to consume her to fill his physical hunger--physical in terms of the stomach and the sexual drive. The irony of the affair is that Esther who is much more

bountiful in body and in personality than Susan, does not satisfy his appetite. Ultimately, they are all left hungry.

Once Esther's suspicions of the affair are confirmed, she flees to her own basement apartment. Her flight is reminiscent of a previous flight after her father died:

'I went mad once,' she says about the first time. 'It was very interesting. I got very depressed after my father died and drank a bottle of bleach. It didn't kill me but I couldn't swallow for months and I got quite thin, and I left Alan to find out what the world was like - and do you know what? It was full of men'. (Weldon 105)

Comparing the two stages is very interesting. During the first flight, Esther fills her emptiness with sexual encounters:

That time it was easy. It was a positive act. I wanted sex, and life, and experience. I wanted things, I was young. I could hurt and destroy and not worry. I had excuses. This time it was different. I did it because the state I was in seemed intolerable, not because I hoped for anything better. (Weldon 120)

This time, she leaves because of a different kind of despair--a resignation. Strikingly, she sees the first desertion of her husband as justifiable because it led her to actively seek something more. While most people would excuse the second separation, when life had become "intolerable," Esther calls this a "sin . . . against the whole structure of society," (Weldon 120) because it is passive and hopeless and it challenges marriage as an infallible institution.



All of these issues closely link food and sex. Esther and Alan had moved away from a sexual relationship in their marriage to one based on rituals of shared meals and rich foods. Then, once the diet begins, Alan uses sex to abate his hunger, to replace his food. Esther, on the other hand, gives up on her marriage, and uses food to fill her internal emptiness. There is a very interesting connection between her search for men and sex to fill her internal emptiness after her father's death shifting to her middle age consumption of food.

Unfortunately, once she descends into her apartment, she does not find the food as satisfying as she hoped. She keeps her cabinets lined with cans of food and "[w]hen her stocks ran low she became uneasy" (Weldon 8). Esther depends on food to feed her physical and spiritual hunger. Women with eating disorders often make this connection. In her studies of women who suffer from eating disorders, Kim Chernin quotes one woman in therapy as saying:

I have spent my whole life making sure the kitchen would be plentifully provided. I have used every ounce of capacity I have planning and serving meals in order to overcome this terrible fear of emotional starvation.

(147)

The speaker could easily have been Esther--and once she leaves home and has no one to provide for but herself, she must gorge herself to fill the void. As she stuffs herself, she tells Phyllis, her incredulous friend, "It has nothing to do with hunger for God's sake" (Weldon 53). The internal gnawing hunger that Esther feels is not subdued through any amount of food. Regardless of the layers of fat that surround her on the outside, she is still vulnerable on the inside.

She tells her son, "My troubles are not outside me, they are inside me. Those are the worst troubles of all" (Weldon 69).

Esther is struggling to get some control over her life just as Marcia does in Quartet in Autumn. At the beginning of the diet, Esther says, "One should be able to control one's size, if one is going to control one's life" (Weldon 36). Unfortunately, she feels as if she cannot do either one. Esther, like Marcia, also relies on lined rows of food in the cabinet to bring her comfort and even her furniture is nailed to the floor (Weldon 7). This suggests her need for regularity in the crumbling stability of her life. Her overeating is another aspect of that attempt to redirect her life. She tells Phyllis, "I don't really eat, I scavenge. I am trying to clean up the mess that surrounds me, like a cat cleaning up after having kittens. Sometimes they eat the kittens too, by mistake" (Weldon 81). This self-portrait balances between being shocking and amusing, but it is also a rather sad, desperate description of Esther's enormous needs and her inability to fulfill them.

It is Weldon's skill as a storyteller that so carefully balances the humorous with the repulsive. Weldon describes Esther's plump hands "and the butter mingled with the dirt round her nails," rubbing drops of butter into her dress (Weldon 8). This suggests an amusing picture of slobbishness that can also be slightly disgusting. Later, when Esther visits her doctor after feeling sick, he tells her, "'You make me feel sick too.' Having said it he smiled, seeming quite pleased with himself. Esther, feeling that in so freely indulging his rudeness he had achieved a lifetime's ambition, warmed to him just a little" (Weldon 89). The sarcasm in this passage makes the audience

laugh at Esther and her condition. The story seems light and funny-- a "fat woman's joke" indeed. However, then Weldon pulls the audience back into a rare, private moment in Esther's story when she gets violently ill because her body cannot tolerate all the food she has eaten. She gets back in bed and:

wondered if perhaps she had not gone too far? She had not really meant any of this to happen - as a child may feel who, setting light to a wastepaper basket to draw attention to himself, then has to watch his entire home go up in flames. (Weldon 86)

This touching analogy portrays Esther's lack of control and her need for attention and it strongly resembles Marcia's similar, albeit, opposite cries for help.

Ultimately, Esther, unlike Marcia, returns to her life with her husband. This conclusion can be interpreted in two ways. On the one hand, at least some of Esther's needs have been satisfied. She has come to represent a sort of replenishing mother that other characters come to for nourishment and care. Everyone in the story makes trips to Esther's basement--Phyllis, Alan, her son Peter, even Susan. They are drawn to Esther to hear her story, urge her to return, or ask her for advice. In support of this image, Susan, the secretary that Alan had an affair with, brings Esther a lily plant and tells her, "It won't grow for me. That's why I brought it to you. I thought you could make it grow. Something has to come out of all this. It must. If only a bloody pot plant," (Weldon 133). All the characters believe in Esther's power to make things right again. She is the only tie that holds them all together and, in doing so, holds

their entire social structure. Without her return, they will all crumble. She is needed. As Esther prepares to leave with Alan, she realizes that the plant has started to grow and exclaims, "Good heavens! Do you mean to say that I did that? Do you mean to say it's growing for me?" (Weldon 143). Her self satisfaction displays her recovering sense of worth as she reclaims her role as a wife and nurturer.

Unfortunately, that interpretation seems a bit simple--like forcing a happily ever after ending. For Esther also "appears to be defeated" (Weldon 143). She agrees to return with Alan but her choice seems to be more from resignation than from anticipation of improvement. In fact, when Phyllis is hysterically insisting that wives always win in the end, Esther sadly answers, "And what a victory, over what" (Weldon 142). The reality of the conclusion probably lies somewhere in between. The ending is not an automatically perfect resolution, but Esther does find herself able to return and she discovers several insights about both herself and the people who surround her that allow her to better develop her own sense of self and identity.

The final novel, that actually comes closest to suggesting resolution in the end, is The Edible Woman, by Margaret Atwood. This is the story of Marian, a young woman in her mid-twenties. She has a job revising questionnaires for a survey company, a self-righteous, seemingly independent roommate, and a steady, reliable boyfriend. And, through the majority of the story, Marian also has

an eating disorder strongly resembling anorexia nervosa.<sup>2</sup> Like the other women, Marian's disorder stems mostly from her lack of control over different aspects of her life, her inability to negotiate her identity within her social structure, and her faltering development of a strong sense of self. As Marian attempts to define her self, she feels pulled from all sides by different ideas of what her role should be. In the introduction to a compilation of essays about eating disorders in literature, Lilian Furst and Peter Graham suggest that eating disorders commence as an:

outcome of profound conflicts between individuals . . .  
and society as they attempt to fashion (or to understand)  
themselves in relation (or in opposition) to prescribed  
roles and assumptions about adulthood, femininity, and  
sexuality. (11-12)

This analysis describes Marian's struggle with identity and autonomy and helps explain the onset of her physical rejection of food.

Marian's refusal to eat is different from Marcia's because she *wants* to eat but cannot. Her body refuses to permit her to take in any food as if to say that, until her emotional and spiritual hungers have been recognized and satisfied, her body will not be fulfilled. Unfortunately, she cannot maintain a strong sense of an inner core, so her internal needs are not even identified yet. At the beginning of the story, Marian has a dream in which:

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<sup>2</sup> For an interesting comparison between Marian's disorder and anorexia nervosa, see Cameron 45-65.

I had looked down and seen my feet beginning to dissolve, like melting jelly, and had put on a pair of rubber boots just in time only to find that the ends of my fingers were turning transparent. I had started towards the mirror to see what was happening to my face, but at that point I woke up. (Atwood 43)

Marian is afraid of disappearing. She feels herself losing the battle of self-definition and realizes that it could bring her own destruction. She creates an interesting analogy, one that also helps explain her rejection of food, when she describes the preparation of a turtle:

You were supposed to keep your live turtle in a cardboard box or other cage for about a week, loving it and feeding it hamburger to rid it of its impurities. Then just as it was beginning to trust you and perhaps follow you around the kitchen like a sluggish but devoted hard-shelled spaniel, you put it into a cauldron a cold water (where no doubt it would swim and dive happily, at first) and then brought it slowly to a boil. The whole procedure was reminiscent of the deaths of early Christian martyrs. What fiendishness went on in kitchens around the country, in the name of providing food!" (Atwood 159)

Marian feels the similarity between herself and the turtle, with all the possibilities of being lured into a boiling cauldron. She, too, may have a hard shell, but her inner core is soft and ill defined. Like Marcia and Esther, Marian has almost no sense of self.

The interesting thing about Marian's character is that at the beginning of the story, she seems to have a relatively strong sense of self. Her inner thoughts and assessments of people and events express an incredibly poignant understanding of human nature. The problem, however, is that Marian never verbally expresses or even shows awareness of the value of her inner thoughts. Since she never shares that side of herself with others, its development falters. In addition, the personas she tries to adopt to show others are poorly defined due to a lack of positive role models and her inability to allow her own inner core to shine through. Finally, her lack of autonomy over her own life continues to corrode her overall sense of self.

The problem of developing her persona is created both by unacceptable role models and conflicting ideas of what her own role should be. Marian's role models include her school friend, Clara, her roommate, Ainsley, and her co-workers, "the office virgins" (Atwood 20). Each of these women represent a stereotypical role--virgin, mother, wife--but none of them seems to be complete in herself. Clara plays the mother figure--eternally pregnant and sacrificing--with only a touch of bitterness about her fate as "just a housewife" (Atwood 38). Marian has a hard time reconciling this bloated, pregnant figure with the "tall fragile girl" from high school who was, in a classroom of oily potato-chip-fattened adolescents, "everyone's ideal of translucent perfume-advertisement femininity" (Atwood 35). Marian cannot fit either the eternal mother or the fragile feminine aspect of this role.

The office virgins fall at the other end of the spectrum but they are equally inappropriate role models for Marian. Marian explains their reasons for protecting their virginity:

Millie from a solid girl guide practicality, Lucy from social quailing, which seems to be rooted in a conviction that all bedrooms are wired for sound, with society gathered at the other end tuning its earphones; and Emmy, who is the office hypochondriac, from the belief that it would make her sick, which it probably would.

(Atwood 20-21)

In these descriptions, Marian subtly pokes fun at the office virgins and she cannot relate her own identity to theirs. Marian also objects to the scheming and manipulation the office virgins resort to in order to snare the right man. She naturally resists such obvious schemes as Lucy employs when she:

[t]rains herself like a many-plumed fish-lure with glass beads and three spinners and seventeen hooks through the likely looking places . . . where the right kind of men might be expected to be lurking, ravenous as pike, though more maritally inclined. (Atwood 114)

The image is humorously unflattering and can be used to describe Ainsley as well.

Ainsley's character is more complex because she appears to be strong-willed and independent but ultimately, searches as desperately as the other women for another person to fulfill her needs. First, after renouncing the institution of marriage, Ainsley announces her intent to have a baby, believing that it will give her a



sense of purpose (Atwood 39). She launches into a search for a prospective father that makes her strongly resemble the office virgins with their lures and hooks. Unfortunately, after luring Len, Marian's friend, into unsuspecting fatherhood, Ainsley's brave intentions to be a single mother fall apart when she is told that, without a Father Image, if she has a little boy, "he's absolutely *certain* to turn into a ho-ho-ho-homosexual" (Atwood 186). Ainsley's fear of this fate propels her into Plan B--finding a husband. This is yet another role that Marian cannot fit into. The significance of all these different roles of women is that they all represent options that Marian could try to take but that her subconscious firmly rejects. Thus, instead of supporting her development, these depressing images further damage her development and, thus, her sense of self.

The other factor that contributes to Marian's diminishing inner core is her lack of autonomy in her life. For example, in the context of her job, Marian has very little control over the decisions that are made. Her supervisor tells her that she will be required to contribute to an obligatory Pension Plan that she does not want to participate in. After the supervisor leaves, Marian says:

I was quite depressed; it bothered me more than it should have. It wasn't only the feeling of being subject to rules I had no interest in and no part in making: you get adjusted to that at school. It was a kind of superstitious panic about the fact that I had actually signed my name, had put my signature to a magic document which seemed to bind me to a future so far ahead I couldn't think about it. Somewhere in front of

me a self was waiting, pre-formed, a self who had worked innumerable years for Seymour Surveys and was now receiving her reward. (Atwood 20)

Decisions like this, made for her, against her will, are what she sees as shaping her self and her future. Her fear and discomfort at her lack of self-determination are apparent in this section and others. When another supervisor at work asks her to pre-test a survey over the weekend, Marian only raises a small protest by saying, "'Does it have to be this weekend?' I asked, somewhat pointlessly" (Atwood 24). She performs the tasks that her company gives her and tries not to complain.

Interestingly, the reputation she has at Seymour Surveys is that she is always in control. She remains detached and finds that "[t]hey had taken lately to complimenting her on her calmness in emergencies" (Atwood 110). The irony of this evaluation of Marian is clear. She is the only one who realizes her actual lack of control where it really matters. The image of a sensible, controlled woman is reinforced by Peter, her boyfriend/fiance. Peter tells her, "I know I can always depend on you. Most women are pretty scatterbrained but you're such a sensible girl" (Atwood 91). As Marian tries to fit herself into these limited, controlled roles, her inner rebellion escalates.

The first visible indication of Marian's loss of control over her actions is when she runs wildly away from Peter, Len, and Ainsley at a dinner party. As she runs, she thinks, "I was surprised to find my feet moving, wondering how they had begun, but I didn't stop" (Atwood 73). She goes through a rather elaborate escape with the

others chasing her through yards and over fences and when she is caught, she is relieved to have been stopped (Atwood 75). Later that night, she slips under the bed in Len's living room when they go for cognac. Once she is crammed underneath, she wishes they would find and rescue her, since she can "no longer recall what good reasons had led me to cram myself under Len's bed in the first place" (Atwood 78). Marian's anger had built all night as she watched Ainsley's young-and innocent act and listened to Len and Peter's macho hunting descriptions and she slides under the bed as a way to contain and, at the same time, avoid her fury. Unfortunately, while she can momentarily escape the causes of her anger, she does not escape the anger itself. She has to be forcibly removed and when Peter asks, "What the hell were you doing under there?", Marian sullenly answers, "It was quieter" (Atwood 79). The description of this scene is outrageously funny, but it is also very significant in its representation of the rage that causes her unusual behavior.

The final evidence of Marian's loss of control is when she relinquishes her power of decision making to Peter after they become engaged. When Peter asks when she wants to get married, she refrains from her usual flippant response like, "What about Groundhog Day?" and instead answers, "I'd rather have you decide that. I'd rather leave the big decisions up to you." She thinks, "I was astounded at myself, I'd never said anything remotely like that to him before. The funny thing was I really meant it" (Atwood 92). Something about her relationship with Peter leads her to completely give up her right to autonomy. Immediately following that surrender, the narration of the story shifts from first person to third

person.<sup>3</sup> With no autonomy, Marian cannot think of herself in "the first person singular" (Atwood 284); she has no self remaining. Soon after this shift in narration, Marian's eating disorder begins in full force.

As her body rejects all foods, Marian begins to recognize the fragility of her sense of self. As she bathes, she watches the reflection of herself in the tub faucet. Looking at the three images the faucet creates, she thinks:

They were not quite identical: the two on the outside were slanted in towards the third. How peculiar to see three reflections of yourself at the same time; she swayed back and forth, watching the way in which the different bright silver parts of her body suddenly bloated or diminished. (Atwood, 224)

Unfortunately, just as she begins to understand that she is not one sided and can have many different aspects of her personality united by one core, she becomes "afraid that she was dissolving, coming apart layer by layer like a piece of cardboard in a gutter puddle" (Atwood 224). Now that Marian cannot nourish herself at all, she has even less to hold onto and she frequently fears that things that hold her image or reflection, like the tub faucet, will either destroy her or capture her forever. This fear is magnified at Peter's party, when he tries to take her picture. As Peter calls instructions for how she should stand, Marian feels her body freeze:

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<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the alternation of first- and third-person narration, see Peel 112-114.

[s]he couldn't move. She couldn't even move the muscles of her face as she stood and stared into the round glass lens pointing towards her, she wanted to tell him not to touch the shutter-release but she couldn't move. (Atwood 238)

That fear ultimately drives her from the party, running for freedom before Peter can pull the trigger of the camera that would stop her, "fixed indissolubly in that gesture, that single stance, unable to move or change" (Atwood 252). The urgency of this realization finally forces Marian to take action and brings on the resolution of her eating disorder.

After Marian leaves the party, she seems to internalize the analysis of women as wives that Joe, Clara's husband, suggests. He tells her that when a woman gets married:

her core gets invaded . . . Her feminine role and her core are really in opposition, her feminine role demands passivity from her so she allows her core to get taken over by the husband. And when the kids come, she wakes up one morning and discovers she doesn't have anything left inside, she's hollow, she doesn't know who she is anymore; her core has been destroyed. (Atwood 242)

Marian blames the destruction of her core on Peter and she fears being left as an empty shell, which is actually a distinct possibility, considering her inability to eat. Marian offers Peter a substitution for her self--a sponge cake in the shape of a woman. She tells him, "You've been trying to destroy me, haven't you? You've been trying

to assimilate me. But I've made you a substitute, something you'll like much better. This is what you really wanted all along, isn't it? I'll get you a fork" (Atwood 279). Marian refuses to let herself be consumed by others, but she also suggests that perhaps she would not have been enough to satisfy Peter's hunger anyway. Until she can develop her own self, there is really no substance to her. So, she reclaims her *self* for herself, thus taking back some control over her own life. Symbolically, the story concludes when the narration returns to first person and Marian overcomes her eating disorder by eating the female cake.

Once again, the conclusion does not insure a simple outcome. The difficult task of self-definition still lies ahead for Marian as it did for Esther. What these three novels have shown, however, is that without a strong, positive sense of self, resolution is probably impossible. The conclusion of Pym's Quartet in Autumn is tragic and depressing, but the conclusions of Weldon's The Fat Woman's Joke and Margaret Atwood's The Edible Woman offer hope.

Marian and Esther each reach a self-awareness through their problems with eating that allows them to overcome the causes that lie behind their eating disorders. For Marian, the awareness means rejecting her relationship with Peter so that she can establish her own identity instead of being merely an aspect of his. This break symbolizes the first active control Marian takes over her own life. Her resolution, then, is about action--taking both control and responsibility for shaping her own self. For Esther, self-awareness comes through a more complete understanding of others and, thus, of herself. Her resolution is about knowledge and the empowerment it

brings her. Both these women make a reclamation of autonomy, reestablish their identities in their social structures, and begin to reconstruct their senses of self or inner cores.

The question, of course, is why can't Marcia also recover? Sadly, she never reaches that self-awareness that saves Marian and Esther. There are two striking differences in Marcia's situation to those of the other two women. The first difference is that Marcia, unlike either Esther or Marian, is completely cut off from others. Her total isolation seems to make her situation more extreme and her recovery less likely. The second difference is that Marcia never realizes that something is *wrong* with her patterns of eating--or not eating, as the case may be. Since she does not acknowledge the existence of a problem, she cannot fix it. Therefore, Marcia's denial of any problem and her avoidance of all interaction with others seals her fate.

These three novels suggest that eating disorders are common in women who lack control over their lives and positive self images. However, with autonomy over their own lives, strong identities within their social structures, and positive senses of self, women can overcome eating disorders. Attaining those goals is not easy. Perhaps someday women's autonomy, strong identities, and positive self images will be a given. And perhaps then we will have a society whose women do not destroy themselves with food.

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